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28 November 2013

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Englund, H. and Yarrow, T. (2013) 'The place of theory : rights, networks, and ethnographic comparison.', *Social analysis.*, 57 (3). pp. 132-149.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/sa.2013.570308>

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The Place of Theory: Rights, Networks and Ethnographic Comparison

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Abstract

The relationship between theory and place has remained a central problem for the discipline of anthropology. Focusing on debates around the concepts of Human Rights and Networks, specifically as these traverse African and Melanesian contexts, this paper highlights how novel ideas emerge through sustained comparison across different regions. Rather than understand places as sources of theories to be applied to other contexts, we argue that anthropologists need to recognise how new concepts are generated through reflexive comparison across different regions. This analysis leads us to question a widespread propensity to understand places as the sine qua non of anthropological theory, proposing instead that place emerges retrospectively as an artefact of comparison. We conclude that while it is therefore necessary to acknowledge the analytic construction of Africa and its sub-regions, there remain compelling reasons to recognize its analytic utility.

Key words: anthropological theory, ethnographic comparison, Melanesia, Africa, relational rights, networks, area studies

Introduction

The New Melanesian Ethnography, a phrase coined over twenty years ago (Josephides 1991), is no longer so new. The reason is the rapid increase, since the 1990s, of anthropological studies that have sought to address topics neglected by this literature. This work has been at the forefront of making the anthropology of Melanesia investigate the effects of colonialism, post-colonialism, nationalism, commodification, Christianity, and so on (e.g. Foster 2008, Gewertz and Errington 1999, Knauff 1999, Robbins 2004). As Marilyn Strathern admitted in an interview with *Cambridge Anthropology* in the mid-1990s, she was a ‘snob’ during her first fieldwork in the 1960s and stayed clear of Christian churches (Czegledy 1992: 5). She did so despite the fact that the Lutheran Church had become established in her research area before she commenced their fieldwork.

The obvious benefits of expanding the thematic scope of Melanesianist anthropology should not, however, result in throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. A designation used more by its critics than by its practitioners, the New Melanesian Ethnography transcended, even as it anticipated, the anthropological auto-critique of the 1980s.

Disciplinary certainties about the ethnographer’s authority had begun to crumble before *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) was published, because the ethnographic work by authors such as Wagner (1974) and Strathern (1980) had started to ask unsettling questions about the assumptions anthropologists had conventionally brought to bear on their study of social groups and gender. Unlike some of the reflexive critique that was to follow, however, the New Melanesian Ethnography presented ethnography as a form of theory or, to

put it more directly, refused a straightforward distinction between theory and ethnography. Reflexivity was a function of anthropological fieldwork, not a practice abstracted from it.

The reflexive turn the New Melanesian Ethnography anticipated has taken several directions in anthropology, but its subtle relationship between ethnography and theory has not received the attention it deserves. Far too often places come to stand for theories, as though ‘composite person’, for example, represented a theory generated by fieldwork in Melanesia, just as ‘segmentary lineage’ once appeared as the distinctive contribution of Africanist anthropology (see e.g. Kuper 2005: 163-178). These two notions are, of course, particularly revealing for the way in which anthropological concepts can and do travel despite their origin in specific ethnographic locations. The concept of the dividual that gave rise to ‘composite person’ was first coined in the anthropology of India (Marriott 1976), and it has been used productively in the ethnographies of East and West Africa (Sanders 2008; Piot 1999). ‘Segmentary lineage’, in turn, had appeared in the study of Arabic societies before its prominence in Africanist anthropology (Dresch 1988). This facility by which concepts travel across ethnographic regions must not, however, be confused with the expectation that they stay intact when they do so. The key lesson of the New Melanesian Ethnography was to make explicit the origins of theory. It involved a degree of specificity about the process of conceptualization and description that a simple application of concepts borrowed from elsewhere can only undermine.

Robbins has suggested that at the heart of the New Melanesian Ethnography was the injunction that “theory be made out of the materials that one finds in the same *place* one finds ones data” (2006: 172; emphasis added). It is worth exploring whether this injunction

properly describes the theory-ethnography interdependence. It certainly conveys a sense of situated, reflexive knowledge production for which the New Melanesian Ethnography is justly renowned. Insofar as propositions, claims, and arguments can be recognized as being ‘theoretical’ only if they afford a perspective on other situations than the one with which they are initially associated, the injunction would also seem to acknowledge the capacity of ethnographically grounded concepts and ideas to travel. But the emphasis on place may inadvertently introduce a measure of cultural relativism into the explication of the New Melanesian Ethnography. Once again place – and the localized fieldwork it seems to demand – appears as the source of anthropological theory, whereas a close reading of works by authors such as Wagner and Strathern reveals a more complex set of conceptual and pragmatic debts that give rise to fresh theory. Fieldwork is the crucial component of this mode of knowledge production. But Wagner’s (1981) idea of culture and Strathern’s (1988a) work on property and gender necessarily refer to modes of knowing and experiencing beyond the instances they ostensibly enunciate. How else would ideas about personhood described in ethnographies on Papua New Guinea provide a productive standpoint for the study of new reproductive technologies in Europe (see Strathern 1992)?

In this article, we seek to reclaim the reflexivity of the New Melanesian Ethnography by exploring its insights into relational knowledge production in the contexts of discourses pertaining to ‘relational rights’ and ‘networks’. After considering how ‘Africa’ has been the recipient of ‘Melanesian’ theories without becoming the donor of theoretical counter-gifts, we attend to Robbins’s notion of the rights of relationships (2010) and to Riles’s work on the network (2001). In both cases we insist that the importance of perspectives deriving from the New Melanesian Ethnography is not in the elaboration of theories to be applied to novel African contexts. Rather, the inspiration of those perspectives lies in demonstrating how the

development of anthropological ideas necessarily exceeds place-bound theorization. ‘Place’ emerges, as such, as an artifact of ethnographic comparison rather than as a stable, empirical reality on which theory is subsequently built. Although sceptical of the way in which ‘culture areas’ have been demarcated by anthropology and related disciplines, our argument by no means denies the analytical utility of constructions such as ‘Africa’. On the contrary, as we discuss in our concluding section, our argument can reinvigorate regional scholarship as anthropology’s key means of placing limits to its theories.¹

Comparisons Compared

For much of the twentieth century it has been axiomatic in anthropology (and, indeed, within the social sciences more broadly) that while theories change and evolve, fieldwork stands still. Fardon (1990) notes that Malinowski the fieldworker remains a part of our ethnographic present, even as theories are located in the past as part of an evolving disciplinary history. Despite over two decades of sustained critical deconstruction, fieldwork is still commonly imagined to anchor the ideas we produce about them. In a related way, anthropologists imagine places as an empirical counterpoint to our theoretical elaborations. This conception illustrates a wider ‘multi-cultural’ ontology of a singular ‘natural’ world that can be multiply (culturally and subjectively) perceived (Viveiros de Castro 1998). While theory is often regarded as more general in its spatial applicability, it is more temporally specific.

Strathern (1990) calls this assumption into question, suggesting that to understand the process by which places are assigned essential features, we need to apprehend the analytic framing of

regions within wider anthropological discourses. Analytic models, built up through a complex process of synthesis, are localized and regionalized at the moment they are transferred. For example, Mauss's theory of the gift emerged in relation to the potlatch, the *Hau*, the Indian gift, and the *Kula*. This complex conceptual history is foreclosed, however, as the ideas are located in relation to different regionalized literatures. Thus we arrive at the idea of the gift *as* Melanesian. As Appadurai's (1986, 1988) discussion of 'gate-keeping concepts' makes clear, this process of theoretical regionalization has taken place across a range of spatial and historical contexts. Similarly Fardon (1990) notes how regions become exemplars of types, features, and phenomena: lineage in Africa, exchange in Melanesia, caste in India, aboriginal marriage, and so on.

If theories have been localized by reference to a range of ethnographic contexts, not all are equally successful. Some theories travel whilst others stay put. Strathern (1990) accounts for this discrepancy as a matter of the extent to which different regional literatures have been drawn into the re-arrangement of the existing canon of anthropological thinking. She refers to this conceptual re-ordering as a 'negative strategy'. Anthropological knowledge is extended and reconfigured through encounters that undermine or trouble the very conceptual framework through which comparisons and translations take place.

Thus the success of 'African' structural-functionalist descent theory is located in its capacity to trouble existing anthropological concepts, and in turn a wider set of Euro-American understandings. For all we might now highlight the ethnocentric assumptions on which such theories were based, the elucidation of a distinct relationship between kinship and polity acted to overturn existing ideas about the distinctiveness of family and government.

Transported to the highlands of New Guinea, these ideas of descent and linearity initially framed the region as an instance of this conceptual framework. This formulation provided the context in which later critiques drew on Melanesian conceptions of the gift to invert African understandings of descent. Later still these ideas were used to question assumptions latent in Marxist understandings of a commodity logic. Thus Strathern suggests that anthropologists working in Melanesia have inverted anthropological concepts, through the creation of ethnographic artifacts that appear to originate in Melanesia. However, the success of these objects does not straightforwardly derive from the region. Rather:

“... We have to understand that the character of the Melanesian economy is most efficiently grasped through rearranging a particular set of Western concepts, namely those to do with commodification. But the rearrangement can only take place for creative effect when it is seen to be motivated by an external context that stands as an *independent* source. For the inversion not to appear as an internal self-referential move (...), it must appear to have been elicited by conditions outside internal construction.” (Strathern 1990: 210)

An important implication of this insight is that theory and place cannot be understood as the abstract to the concrete nor as the shifting to the stable (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). Rather, the distinction between theory and place is itself an artifact of the way in which we locate the sources of ideas that in practice derive from complex engagements – including with other anthropologists and those we meet while doing fieldwork. This view also means accepting that our sense of a world comprised of distinct regions is an artifact of comparison, not the *sine qua non* from which theory is subsequently built. Places are not the basic units from which comparison proceeds: the concreteness of particular concepts (their location as

self-evident facts about particular places) emerges through comparison with other places and through the complex inter-textual relations on which any ethnography, as a form of writing, depends.

In the light of our discussion so far, we are sympathetic to recent attempts by Africanists to engage with insights emerging from the New Melanesian Ethnography² but cannot greet with unqualified enthusiasm the basis by which such theories have been analogically extended. A notable example is Piot's (1999) work on the Kabre of Togo, which deploys Strathernian theories of Melanesian sociality to overturn the canon of anthropological thinking on Voltaic peoples, and to question key elements of the ways in which Africanist scholars have conceptualized 'society'. Through structural-functionalist, Marxist, and practice theory, he shows how successive theoretical innovations have reproduced prevailing Western understandings. His suggestion is that throughout these transformations, a basic concern with social organization and with the relation between individual and society has prevailed. In moving beyond this, he argues that the Kabre exemplify a wider African propensity to constitute the person through the dialectical incorporation of various 'outsides'.

The result is a description that interestingly exceeds its theoretical starting point, specifically in its attentiveness to the dialectical incorporation of various 'outsides'. As such, theories derived from Melanesian ethnographies are used to illuminate aspects of Kabre sociality that might otherwise be overlooked, and this in turn leads to a critical engagement with a broader literature on globalization. However, the comparative framing of the account does not explicitly negate or impose theoretical limits on the 'Melanesian' concepts from which it starts. Hence while Melanesian theory is used to illuminate African ethnography, there is no

theoretical 'return'. The Melanesian theory of the gift constitutes a theoretical gift, so to speak, that remains un-reciprocated. To the extent that description and analysis exceed their theoretical point of departure, this excess is descriptively bracketed out as a difference of culture and place. Excess is registered as another instance of ethnographic concreteness, rather than as a fundamental extension of anthropology's conceptual apparatus. The image is of 'Melanesian theory' applied (or extended) to 'African ethnography'.

This effect can be understood as an artifact of the framework by which anthropologists conventionally order their comparisons. Over two decades ago, Holy (1987) made explicit the changing conceptualization of the role of ethnographic comparison (see also Gingrich and Fox 2002; Lazar 2012). Where positivistic anthropologists saw description of ethnographic 'facts' as a means to the ends of cross-cultural generalization, interpretive approaches entailed the comparison of processes of meaning creation. He noted that since these are different in distinct cultures and societies, they cannot themselves provide the basis of comparison. In his own words: "To carry out comparison, we need a vantage point that is not culturally specific" (Holy 1987:13). For example, the comparison of gift and commodity logics becomes possible through the mediating, external concept of 'the economy'.

Yet as Strathern (1988b) notes, the problem with this formulation is that anthropology's mediating terms produce their own sense of disproportion. If certain regions seem more interesting than others, that discrepancy is not reducible to the nature of the societies being studied. It arises in relation to the placement of regions vis-à-vis analytic problems. In a related way, Mudimbe (1988) points to the distortion such mediating concepts have with respect to scholarly accounts of Africa. In their 'epistemological ethnocentrism' they set up a

‘silent dependency’. He defines this as “the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from ‘them’ unless it is already ‘ours’ or comes from ‘us’.” (1988: 15)

As a form of conceptual leveling, the New Melanesian Ethnography might appear to provide solutions to this problem, or at least new ways of thinking. This is what Piot (1999) explicitly argues. Yet we need to be alert to the dangers of the comparative possibilities these new conceptual frameworks set up. Piot’s rendering of Kabre sociality is clearly more sophisticated than a straightforward application of concepts from one region to another. Nonetheless, his analysis rests on a conceptual framework in which comparative possibilities are framed by ideas that appear to derive from other parts of the world. Pointing to new forms of personhood and ‘dividuality’ reinscribes the theoretical importance of Melanesia, providing new *versions* of ideas that appear to *originate* elsewhere. Another, perhaps more important, implication is that such cross-cultural analysis underscores a basic duality: ‘we’ construct a conceptual base from which to compare all others. As another ‘other’, the Kabre do not appear to fundamentally trouble the framework in which ‘otherness’ is conceived.

While we wish to make explicit the comparative issues that attend this mode of theoretical application, our intention is not to critique the Strathernian theories of sociality on which his account rests. Rather it is to highlight how Strathern’s own approach points to the limits of this kind of thinking. In addressing the theoretical framing of regions, and the regional framing of theory, she cautions us not only against the straightforward application of theories to places, but also against the mutually validating role of theory and place in the ethnographic imagination. If her own approach is precisely concerned to elucidate the dynamics by which theories reflexively emerge through place (and vice versa), then it is clear that the

straightforward application of theory ('Melanesian' or otherwise) to novel ethnographic contexts will not do justice to this insight. Perhaps a more Strathernian approach might draw less heavily on Strathernian theory?

In highlighting this possibility we draw from her observation that one way of avoiding the sense of disproportion that attends cross-cultural comparison would be to *aim* for comparison whilst keeping in mind the non-comparability of the phenomena compared. This would entail making comparisons without subordinating either to a pre-existing comparative frame.

Strathern outlines how in this approach "... the anthropologist unable to represent the one completely in terms of the other, would use his or her Western concepts to mediate between the two in such a way as to give the analytic language the status of a third voice. The trick would be to demonstrate the non-comparability of [regionally specific] ideas, despite the mediating third language." (1990: 212)

We have been arguing that recent anthropological accounts have sought to re-arrange our descriptions and analyses of various African realities in line with models of sociality emerging through the New Melanesian Ethnography. By contrast, we suggest that a Strathernian analysis invites us to ask how we might use our descriptions of these ethnographic specificities in such a way as to creatively re-arrange the understandings and concepts that are central to metropolitan anthropological theory. To the extent that these theories are now dominated by models of sociality that locate the source of their insight in Melanesia, this would entail a creative re-working of some of the theories we have come to think of as 'Melanesian'.

Relational Rights

The distinction between theory and approach is illustrated by Robbins's (2004, 2010) work, which has emphasized 'relationalism' as the key theoretical contribution of New Melanesian Ethnography. He has not so much questioned the validity of the New Melanesian Ethnography as used his own version of it to conceptualize radical cultural change among the Urapmin people of Papua New Guinea with whom he worked. Relationalism has, as such, come to stand for theory generated through fieldwork in Melanesia. It is revealing that Robbins has found the occasion to salute the New Melanesian Ethnography. as "... a brave, final, and radical stand on the side of cultural difference in the context of an anthropology about to grow tired of detailed explorations of local symbolic worlds in all their particularity" (2006: 172).

Note the emphasis on *cultural* difference as the main preoccupation of New Melanesian Ethnography. Relationalism theorizes, for Robbins, a culturally distinct world and provides a conceptual foundation for his account of Christian conversion among the Urapmin. Unsurprisingly, the opposite of relationalism is 'individualism', and the emphasis on cultural differences informs his desire to carry out an analysis of 'the encounter between a relational culture and an individualist one' (2004: 13). What is, at first sight, surprising is the way in which Robbins has, in his other work, been able to propose universalist aspects in the Melanesianist insights into relationalism. Shifting his attention from radical cultural change to justice and human rights, he noted the limited appeal of relativism: "It is hard to get an

audience even within anthropology, much less outside of it, for a full-blown relativist critique of global discourses of human rights and justice” (2010: 173). It is this avoidance of relativism in current discussions about human rights that he identifies as the main reason why he has not himself previously written about the topic (Robbins 2010: 171). Robbins is concerned to retain an ‘anthropological voice’ in the efforts to engage the topic of human rights after the appeal of relativism has waned. His answer is to “... set aside relativism and play the universalist game” (2010: 173). He gives himself “... the constructive task of suggesting potential universals currently unrecognized or unelaborated in global debates” (2010: 174).

Here relationalism, as it is inflected through Melanesianist anthropology, becomes a ‘candidate universal’ to qualify the convention by which individuals and groups have been seen as rights-bearers by political philosophers, lawyers, and activists across the world. Where the primary unit of value is relationships, people both actively create relationships and experience them as inescapable. As such, relationships cannot be reduced to this or that individual or group and their particular preferences. “It is not so much people who have rights to relationships, but the other way around” (Robbins 2010: 188). Drawing on, among others, Strathern’s (2004) account of a human rights NGO’s intervention in a dispute where a young woman was supposed to be a part of compensation payment, Robbins (2010: 182-186) highlights contemporary tensions between the relational and individualist models of justice in Papua New Guinea. He also notes similarities and differences between relationalism and Honneth’s (1996) theory of recognition to emphasize the capacity of relationalism to open up fresh perspectives on justice in the contemporary West, a capacity that suggests its potential as a candidate universal (Robbins 2010: 187-188).

The jump from distinct cultures to candidate universals seems breathtaking or, at least, inconsistent, but the discrepancy may be more apparent than real and a result of different topics addressed – radical cultural change in one instance and human rights in the other. Relationalism is only one among other universals, and the tension between different models of justice discussed in Strathern's account might be seen to indicate the institutional reasons why some models appear to be more universal than others – backed by transnational NGOs and aid money, the individualist model of justice can be mistaken for a more generally applicable model than relationalism. It is here that Robbins's argument reveals its anthropological credentials by refusing the easy distinction between generality and particularity that such interventions can entail. What he does not mention, however, is the long history of relational rights as a topic of anthropological theory, from Maine (1913) to Malinowski (1926), who both famously emphasized social identity and status as the preconditions of rights. Before the current focus on human rights in discussions about justice, relational rights received an ethnographically and theoretically more sophisticated treatment in the works of mid-century Africanists (see e.g. Epstein 1954; Gluckman 1965), whose insights continue to be evoked in more contemporary settings (see e.g. Comaroff and Roberts 1981; Englund 2002; Griffiths 1997; Oomen 2005). In fact, such has the emphasis been in Africanist anthropology on the embeddedness of dispute settlement in kinship rights and obligations that the paradigmatic cases of Robbins's candidate universal might be better located there than in Melanesianist anthropology.

Tempting as this observation might seem for an Africanist to make, however, the theory of relational rights did not emanate from any particular place. The argument between Gluckman

(1965, 1969) and Bohannan (1957, 1969) reveals the extent to which working in the same continent and sharing similar analytical interests did not guarantee consensus on the nature and purpose of anthropological comparison. After identifying the importance of debt and obligation to the definition and practice of relational rights, Gluckman could hope for a greater precision about the meaning of debt only through a comparative analysis involving material not only from his own Barotse study in present-day Zambia but also from other ethnographies of ‘tribal law’ as well as from studies of Roman and early English law. “What is the difference between debt in these contexts”, he asked, “and the fact that any obligation establishes a state of indebtedness, in another sense of the word, while clearly obligation is basic to any system of law” (1965: 245)? The question was skewed neither towards particularity nor generality as such but sought to elicit specificity through a comparative exercise. Gluckman felt, however, frustrated with the cultural particularism of some of his contemporaries working on African ethnography. Bohannan (1957) also emphasized the importance of debt to the idea of justice among the Tiv of Nigeria, but he insisted on the uniqueness of their system that could not be examined in terms of the concepts of Western jurisprudence. Each culture had its folk-system, and it would have been an error to ‘raise’ a folk-system ‘to the status of an analytical system’ (Bohannan 1957: 69). Note the assumption of scaling up when one moves from a folk-system to an analytical system – the first is always smaller in its scale than the second. “The insistence on uniqueness constantly obscures problems”, Gluckman (1965: 255) complained, pointing out the many not-so-unique features of Tiv language on justice and debt.

It was the ‘lack of perspective’ that troubled Gluckman (1965: 251) in cultural particularism, the inability to identify ‘similarities within differences’ (1965: 254) that would permit a more precise understanding of what was specific about the case in hand. To mark his intellectual

debts, Gluckman dedicated his book to ‘the jurists of Barotseland and of the Yale Law School’. A close ethnographic study of a particular judicial system was, therefore, more than the result of intense fieldwork in Zambia. The locations of the emergence of his insights were more than two,³ but the point to stress here is the way in which Gluckman understood universals to be specific in their historical scope and therefore the results of careful comparative work. To be sure, his comparison between tribal law and early English law would seem to have denied that the Barotse and the world where he operated outside fieldwork were coeval (Fabian 1983). Yet Gluckman, who pioneered the study of contemporary race and industrial relations in the anthropology of Africa (see e.g. Gluckman 1958, 1961), was equally interested to note the nature of justice in contemporary Britain in the light of his findings from Barotseland. Again, similarities and differences could be identified. Evoking the importance of property among the Barotse in constituting and maintaining relationships,⁴ he admitted awareness that “... obligations in all personal relations in modern society are expressed in the form of material gifts, and redress for small offences is similarly made” (Gluckman 1965: 266). Such ‘pockets of multiplex relationships in modern society’ (Gluckman 1965: 266) should not, however, obscure the specific nature commodities had taken in contemporary Britain. Rather than being vital to the discharging and creation of debts between persons, “... commodities began to form an autonomous system, and ... increasingly drew people into impersonal, restricted, ephemeral relationships” (Gluckman 1965: 270). Insights from fieldwork in Zambia were crucial to afford this perspective on contemporary Britain. As a comparative exercise, it was no more anachronistic than the gift-commodity and West-Melanesia distinctions that Strathern (1988a) deployed in her exploration of sociality and knowledge practices.

The notion of relational rights, in other words, was the innovation of neither Africanist nor Melanesianist anthropology but the outcome of careful, reflexive comparison. Robbins's (2010) comparison of Melanesian insights with Honneth's work (1996) continues this approach to a good effect, but his self-professed relativist impulse (Robbins 2010: 171) has also resulted in the emphasis on cultural distinctiveness in his readings of the New Melanesian Ethnography, as described above. The dispute between Gluckman and Bohannan demonstrates, however, that such analytical predilections do not simply reflect the place where anthropologists have done their fieldwork. Gluckman worked within a tradition of anthropology that adopted as its key interest the description of difference and specificity in human affairs, without shying away from the possibility of using universal categories in that descriptive work. Unlike relativism, it made possible an engaged anthropology in which "... the right of the ruling community to a monopoly of moral judgement [was] sharply questioned" (James 1973: 46), a position all the more striking when its origin is traced to the colonial period when, for example, Evans-Pritchard (1931) admonished colonial administrators for their ignorance of the distinctions Africans made between different types of witchcraft and sorcery. Yet the approach did not emanate from some distinct 'British School', as Gluckman's (1975: 27-29) identification of a parallel between Leach's structuralist fascination with 'cultural grammar' and South Africa under apartheid made clear.⁵ After all, both Bohannan and Gluckman received their training in Oxford. Rather than localizing anthropological knowledge as a function of the places where anthropologists either do their fieldwork or get their training, it seems more pertinent to assess the extent to which they have acknowledged the multiple sources of their insights.

Networks

Networks, like ‘relational rights’, have provided the focus for sustained analytic attention that has localized its insights in a range of ways. Tracing some of the debates surrounding the concept, this section explores how Riles’s (2001) recent formulation of ‘the network’, developed in the context of Fiji, prompts reflection on the theorization of ‘networks’ by various Africanists. While we find utility in Riles’ approach, which turns the network from an analytic to an ethnographic concern, we argue that her approach itself precludes the possibility of any straightforward application of her theory. Rather it begs the question of what conceptual limits novel contexts might introduce.

For scholars such as Barnes (1969), Mitchell (1969, 1974), and Epstein (1969), Network Analysis provided a counterpoint to the rigid abstractions of structural functionalist approaches. Network theory can thus be seen as a ‘negative strategy’ in the Strathernian sense, it exposed conceptual limits to structural functionalist thinking when applied to the urban contexts these scholars were beginning to examine. According to Mitchell (1969), while in ‘traditional’ rural contexts, the model of lineage descent continued to provide “... a coherent and systematic framework into which nearly all the daily activities of people and their relationships...could be fitted” (1969: 9), structural accounts were inadequate to the realities of urban life. Here the potential of network analysis was seen to inhere in its capacities to reveal how actors were forced to perform multiple roles in order to link domains of life that appeared to be structurally distinct. For network analysts, the network is invoked as an explanation of the dynamics by which actors link structurally and institutionally distinct domains of life, through the contextual negotiation of roles and relations.

On a superficial reading, these accounts might suggest that personal networks are sociologically or ethnographically distinctive features of African sociality. However, network analysts themselves offer reasons for circumspection. While recognizing a shifting ethnographic focus (away from ‘tribal’ and ‘traditional’ societies, towards ‘urban’ and ‘modern’ ones) as a significant conceptual stimulus, scholars such as Mitchell, Barnes, and Epstein were at pains to distinguish network analysis from the ethnographic circumstances it described. As an explicitly analytic construct, the network enabled comparison, precisely because it stood outside the realities compared. It should be noted that although many of the initial applications of the concept were in African contexts (specifically Southern Africa), significant developments in the approach arose in relation to studies of Norway (Barnes 1954) and London (Bott 1957). Yet the more fundamental point is that even in the context of Africa, social and cultural differences emerged as a property of the distinct forms that networks can take. Rather than an explanation or theory, network analysts argued that as a *concept*, the network’s capacity to facilitate comparison lay precisely in its externality. Thus Kapferer is critical of a tendency to imagine network analysis as a ‘theory in itself’, proposing, rather, that it should be regarded as “...a concept ... by which we seek ‘to organise human perception’” (1973: 84). Networks, as concepts, are not ‘natural entities’ but a way of organizing the realities that are encountered in the field. Thus the appeal of the concept can be seen to inhere in its capacity to order complexity by enabling comparison across a range of manifestly diverse ethnographic contexts. Epstein (1969), for example, suggests that as an analytic concept the network enables discernment between behavior that is ‘random and haphazard’, and that which is ‘ordered’.

As one instance of a modernist faith in cumulative knowledge, the network therefore held out the possibility of the incorporation of multiple perspectives in an overarching 'whole'. In this pluralist vision, comparison was a matter of identifying general scales to act as common denominators that aided the movement from the particular to the general (Strathern 1991; cf. Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). Against this ideal, internal critiques foreground the problems that result from a slippage of scale and of the difficulties entailed in moving from the concrete to the abstract (and vice versa). Barnes, for example, comments on the conceptual confusions that have resulted from the application of network analysis to different ethnographic material: "Perhaps because of the diversity of contexts in which the idea of a network has been applied, there is already a good deal of confusion in the literature, for each analyst...introduces new refinements to suit his own particular problem" (1969: 53). His wider concern is that such 'refinements' end up confusing the concept, so that the basis for comparison is annulled. Related problems emerge with respect to the extent to which network analysis is able to operate independently of actors' own understandings of the relationships they hold.

Recent work turns these conceptions of the network in Riles's own terms 'inside out' (2001). Treating the network not as an analytic construct, but as an ethnographically significant fact, she shows how, for NGO workers based in Fiji, the network is itself intrinsic to the sociality they inhabit. For these people, 'the network' and 'personal relations' are not mutually explanatory contexts, but 'versions of one another seen twice' (2001: 27, after Strathern 1991). Accordingly, "Networkers in Suva do not make sense of their personal relations in terms of their networks or vice versa; rather, like in the double view of the hologram as described by Baudrillard (...), it is in seeing the form of each in turn that both become real" (2001: 27). Her own account makes explicit how this ethnographic understanding leads to a

reconsideration of the tenets of network analysis. Networkers in Fiji “would insist that personal relationships of the kind social network analysts study are not networks because they are not formal. For networkers in Suva, a network was an entity of a particular form. To include a person, an institution, or a project in a network was to formalize it and vice versa” (2001: 66). No longer an external (analytic) context, the network therefore emerges as a product of the imaginative practices of her informants.

The account elucidates a theory whose elegance and analytic power might suggest its utility as an explanatory device for other contexts – including in Africa. In line with our broader argument, however, our suggestion is that such a theoretical application should be resisted. Rather than seek to replicate the theory, recognition of the power of the insight should direct us to the *approach* that gave rise to it. In particular, the account usefully troubles the analytic place of ‘the relation’, directing attention to the *form* in which social relations emerge. In questioning the self-evidence of a distinction between ‘personal’ and ‘institutional’ relations, Riles also suggests fruitful possibilities for research that suspends analytic judgment about the ways in which these domains intersect, in order to apprehend how such domains are ethnographically configured. As a counterpoint to much contemporary theorization, such approaches might fruitfully lead us beyond the generalized terms in which personal relations, as networks, have been variously apprehended as vectors of corruption and neo-patrimonialism across the continent of Africa,⁶ directing us instead to the ethical concerns that surround the intersections of different relational forms. Such a focus might in turn introduce productive limits to Riles’s conceptual framework. In Ghana, for example, focusing on the ways in which NGO workers understand and practice ‘networks’ brings to light the specific ways in which personal relations are understood as networks, challenging the

universality of Riles's claim that networks, as form, emerge in opposition to (as inside out versions of) personal relations (see Yarrow 2011).

Our wider point is that, as an instance of New Melanesian Ethnography, Riles's insights about the network emerge via a form of reflexivity with epistemological underpinnings profoundly at odds with the comparative framework. If network analysis used the concept of the network to order ethnographic material, Riles reveals how the network as ethnographic artifact, acts to (re-)order anthropological concepts. In line with the New Melanesian Ethnography, from which her approach explicitly draws, her account effectively makes a virtue of the 'confusion' of ethnography and analysis that Barnes decries. Riles's understanding of the network is an outcome of a form of conceptual displacement; the side-effect of taking seriously what her informants take seriously themselves. Here knowledge increases not through the accumulation of contexts within a comparative framework that remains untroubled, but through increasing internal differentiation resulting from the conceptual re-deployment and re-configuration that attends ethnographic engagement.

Conclusion: A Place for Africa?

In different ways, rights and networks both emerge as complex intersections of ideas in ways that trouble any straightforward separation between 'theory' and 'ethnography', and which demonstrate the utility of cross-cultural comparison, not as a means to the end of generalization, but as a method of conceptual refinement and differentiation. In both cases we have shown how description and comparison in these terms ('relational rights' and

‘networks’) destabilizes and complicates the terms themselves, which in turn provides the basis for a descriptive language more finely attuned to the specificities of particular contexts. At once concepts belonging everywhere and nowhere, ‘relational rights’ and ‘networks’ can become ‘third terms’ that mediate insights gained through long-term fieldwork in diverse locations. Patently, some concepts are more specific to their ethnographic context than others, and not all concepts have the potential to become ‘third terms’. In this regard, crucial is our insistence on keeping application and approach separate in imagining the relationship between ethnography and theory. Following the spirit of the New Melanesian Ethnography as an approach, it would do no justice to the approach to envisage relational rights or networks as theories awaiting their application to particular ethnographic cases.

It is worth reiterating our argument that this view of ethnographic comparison marks a departure from the association of anthropological concepts with particular places or regions. As Lederman (1988) has suggested, culture areas were from the outset not just geographical units but theories about the people and environments that pertained there. This mutual validation of theory and place has created problems that persist in certain formulations of regional differences as naturalized and discrete entities. A diversity of people is subsumed to an encompassing logic. While this results in the relation of people and entities who may have little in common beyond geographical contiguity, it also leads to the disconnection of related but geographically discrete people and things. For Africa, others have pointed out that a regional focus has resulted in an unwarranted sense of coherence and a relative lack of attention to the processes by which the continent connects to people and places beyond it (e.g. Guyer 2004, Chabal 1996).

Over the past three decades, the notion of geographically bounded units has come under sustained critical attack in anthropology. The bounded field sites presupposed as the basis of fieldwork by a previous generation of anthropologists have been shown to be artifacts of the very practices through which anthropologists researched and wrote about them (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1998). At the same time, empirical changes, frequently glossed as ‘globalization’, lead to a situation in which people and things are imagined to be on the move as never before. In this context, anthropologists have questioned the wisdom both of geographically bounded local field sites and geographically bounded regions. Old habits die hard, however. Even the theoretically most *au fait* of anthropologists find themselves defending the association of theory with place, entering copious caveats about the porosity of the place they identify as the origin of theory (see e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 2011).

For many of these anthropologists, regional scholarship has been discredited as an outdated relic of previous theoretical frameworks and as an anachronism that fails to reflect the connectedness of the contemporary world we inhabit (for a discussion, see Guyer 2004; Lederman 1988). Yet scholarship emerging from a variety of sources might lead us to question whether a bounded notion of either the field or the region is necessarily problematic, if we recognize the arbitrariness of the terms in which we construct it. Our suggestion draws on Candea’s (2007) recent conceptualization of the ‘arbitrary location’ as a critique of multi-sited fieldwork. His argument is that in privileging connections and relations between entities, recent formulations of fieldwork have led us to overlook the importance of disconnection and detachment. In recasting this insight at a regional level, we also take inspiration from Mamdani (1996), who insists that establishing the legitimacy of Africa as a unit of analysis does not entail the ascription of any underlying cultural or historical process to that place.

In this vein, we might acknowledge the analytic construction of Africa and its sub-regions, while recognizing its analytic utility. As an arbitrary location, Africa forces us to consider both relation and detachment, connection, and disjuncture. Ethnographically, this leads us to consider logics and practices that spatially co-exist without relating. Theoretically, this regional framing leads to the reflexive decomposition, differentiation, and recomposition of concepts, even as particular analysts disagree as to what might be important or even the case about any given place. Anthropologists need to allow places to place limits on their ethnographic and theoretical artifacts even as they recognize their own role in the construction of both.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Knut Myhre for organizing the conference that provided the conceptual provocation for the paper, and for thoughtful editorial help. This paper has benefitted from the comments of Matei Candea, Morten Pedersen, Adam Reed, Marilyn Strathern, Richard Werbner, and two anonymous reviewers.

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Endnotes

¹ It goes without saying that our argument is informed by long-term ethnographic engagements in Ghana (Thomas Yarrow) and in Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia (Harri Englund). However, rather than seeking to demonstrate the force of our argument by appealing to our fieldwork, as in much of what we have published, we focus here on other sets of analytic and inter-textual resources in order to put 'place' in its place in anthropological theory.

² See .g. Sanders 2008 and articles in this issue.

³ Gluckman did not fail to mention Manchester in his acknowledgments.

⁴ "The Law of Persons, the Law of Things, and the Law of Obligations are inextricably involved in one another" (Gluckman 1965: 271).

⁵ Memorably, Gluckman noted that it was "possible in the cloistered seclusion of Kings College, Cambridge, to put the main emphasis on the obstinate differences: it was not possible for 'liberal' South Africans confronted with the policy of segregation within a nation into which 'the others' had been brought, and treated as different – and inferior" (1973: 29).

⁶ As, for example, in the influential formulation of Bayart 1993.

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